CHAPTER VI

SOCIAL PROTESTS
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Protests are accepted instruments of ventilating the grievances on the part of the frustrated groups or individuals against the authorities. They are, in fact, effective instruments of expressing grievances so as to bring pressure upon the Government or authorities to respond to the public. Social protests do try to attempt to bring about a change in certain social institutions or to create an entirely new order. Protests occur in every society and tend to affect directly or indirectly, the social order. Whatever change the world has witnessed in social or any other sphere has been due to the result of social movement or social protests. Protests are usually the expression of dissatisfaction against injustice, social, political and economic. This fact is borne out by Indian experience as well as the State experiences (J&K State). In both these cases freedom struggles were the outcome of various locally organised protest movements.¹

In order to understand the phenomenon of protest, it is desirable to define the term first. The term "Protest" means "to speak strongly against or to express disapproval". It also means "an expression of

declaration of objection, disapproval or dissent, often in opposition to something a person is powerless to prevent or avoid. Protests are primarily a collective action which registers dis-satisfaction with performance of power elite in a political system. They may strive for political and social change too. In modern democracies protests have been recognised as "legitimate and institutionalised form of political behaviour". But so far as our period of research is concerned, protests were considered a "sin and crime" and those who indulged in protests were punished and fined and even put to death.

In pre-modern societies, protests were variously described such as millenarian, chiliastic or messianic movements. Most of the protest ideologies were religious and a few, due to the social disturbances, were social disturbances. But in the modern times, protests have become explicit, with the definite ideology which "compound the interpretive problem in many ways for, it becomes deceptively easy to assume that actual protests lure caused by what ideologists said, it was caused by and intended what said it intended". 2

Actually, the atrocities of Kashmiris started right from its annexation with the Mughals. They ruled the valley through the governors, who were very harsh and fought among themselves. They imposed illegal taxes, one of the Naib Subedar of Muhammad Shah's reign, Agar Khan imposed tax on elephants which were nowhere in Kashmir. This is remembered and recorded by folk saying of Kashmir, as "Agar Khumum Hous" and points to illegal exactions imposed by the tyrannical government of Mughal rule.

After the Mughals Afghans ruled for 67 years and reduced the people to the lowest ebb of penury and degradation. They were followed by the Sikhs, who ruled from 1819 to 1846. They too, like their predecessors, were harsh and exacted as much as they could and reduced the people to a condition of mere slaves. The institution of Begar and floods and famines also played their role towards the devastating conditions of the people of Kashmir.

3. P.N.K. Bamzai, A History of Kashmir: Political, Social and Cultural from the Earliest Times to the Present Day, Delhi, 1962, PP. 394-410. J.H. Knowles, Dictionary of Kashmir Proverbs and Sayings. The people of land are fortunate enough to have a rich folk literature, which provides a meaningful presentation of socio-economic and political conditions of its people, experienced by them through the dark and gloomy days of their long history. The folk literature depict the miseries and sufferings, the cruelties and barbarities perpetrated upon them by their non local supporters and collaborators. It has depicted the administrative drawbacks in the different regimes and also the reaction of people as well. People used it as a weapon to protest against the political oppression and social injustice. Social protests as reflected in the folk-lore of Kashmir. M.Phil. thesis submitted by Farooq Ahmad Bhat to the University of Kashmir.
The Shawl Bauf Protest of 1865

The year 1846 was the most unfortunate year in the history of Kashmir because it was during this year that Kashmir along with its people were sold to a Raja of Jammu, Mian Gulab Singh, who later came to be known as the Maharaja of Jammu & Kashmir. British imperialists not only forced an autocratic ruler on the people of the land, but also supported him militarily. From then onwards, the miseries and misfortunes of the people grew from bad to worse. The autocratic way in which the Dogras ruled the valley, reduced the people to the lowest ebb of penury and degradation. Their high taxation, increased prices, the shutting up of grain kothas, the mis-management and oppression of the Dagh-Shawl etc., were some of the examples of their autocratic and oppressive rule.  

Particular Property of Kashmir: The Kashmiri Shawl

The shoulder mantle or shawl had been in existence, in a variety of forms, from the most ancient times, serving as a staple and protective garment, not for the rich and noble, but also and above all for their people. In ancient Buddhist literature the Shawl can be found among recorded inventories of woolen textiles, and its manufacture appears to have been a cottage industry in

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4. F.M. Hussain, Article, Published in Sheeraza, Threads of Life the Shawl Bauf Agitation of 1865, P. 28.
Kashmir as early as eleventh century. During the previous times, Kashmir was famous in India and abroad due to its arts and crafts, its shawls and pashmina. The name of Kashmir has become synonymous with shawls and foreign shawls have never equalled them in delicate softness, fine web and elegance.

It has been claimed that the shawls of Kashmir had attained much fame in Europe during medieval times. It has been claimed that the veil fastened by a thin golden thread over the forehead of Leonardo da Vinci's world famous Mona Lisa, is a Kashmir shawl. The Mughal Emperors also patronised it and by their attention this industry flourished greatly. Akbar, the Mughal Emperor, who subjugated Kashmir by subterfuge, ordered the nobles to wear Kashmiri shawls, when presenting themselves before the royal courts.


G.M.D. Sufi, Kashmir, Being a History of Kashmir from the Earliest Times to our own, Lahore, 1943. The author cites from an anonymous report dated 1820; 'A rich banker, Shooqun Chand, of respectable establishment and treasurer to the residency, has within two years made up several shawls under his own supervision. Getting material and workmen from Cashmere, but these expenses are much beyond the Saleable value of the manufacturers not is it equal in any respect to the kind of the article made at Cashmerei. The colour is particularly defective.

Jehangir also writes about the shawls of Kashmir to which my father gave the name 'Param-naram' are very famous, there is no need to praise them.

Sir Thomas Roe, James I's ambassador to the Mughal Court, was offered a gold shawl by the Governor of Surat in 1616. Decorative shawls such as these were apparently used as enticing bribes and this is mentioned in the early records of the East India trading Company.

Francois Bernier, the celebrated doctor, philosopher and traveller, spent twelve years in India as Physician to Aurangzeb. He had the privilege of visiting Kashmir, while accompanying Aurangzeb and thus being the first Westerner ever to set foot in the 'enchanted land', Large quantities of shawls were manufactured which gave employment even to children. He wrote, 'these shawls measured five by two and a half feet, were ornamented at both ends with a sort of embroidery made in the loom, a foot in height. The Mughals and the Indians were them also.

This, it is said a particularly property of Cashmere itself. So article washed even in its neighbourhood attains to the same superior perfection in this respect. Ranfit Singh tried similarly to manufacture shawls at Lahoore, but failed just as Shooogun Chand did.

9. Ibid., P.22.
in winter around their heads, passing them over the shoulders as a mantle. One sort of such shawls was manufactured with the wool of country and the other with the wool of the shawl goat of Tibet. The price of the Tus shawl ranged from 50 to 150 rupees. Great pains were taken to manufacture similar shawls at Patna, Agra and Lahore, but they lacked the delicate texture of Kashmir shawls. 10

Certain travel accounts relate that the shawls of Kashmir become famous during the period of Napoleon, when the French scholars brought some shawls from Egypt. The author of the standard work of Kashmir and the shawls cites that 'the first shawls which reached Europe were brought by Napoleon at the time of the campaign in Egypt, as a present to the Empress Josephine, and from that time, the shawls became fashionable'.

In spite of the fact that the shawl industry experienced many vicissitudes, it yet proved a constant source of much income and revenue for the rulers, as well as for the Kharkhandars of Kashmir. 11 The following details, about the export of Kashmir shawls, outside India,

10. Ibid., P. 23.
explains the importance of shawl industry:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sales</th>
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<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>171,709</td>
<td>1858</td>
<td>227,618</td>
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<tr>
<td>1852</td>
<td>146,270</td>
<td>1859</td>
<td>310,027</td>
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<td>1853</td>
<td>215,659</td>
<td>1860</td>
<td>252,828</td>
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<td>1854</td>
<td>170,153</td>
<td>1861</td>
<td>351,093</td>
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<td>1854</td>
<td>192,890</td>
<td>1862</td>
<td>459,441</td>
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<td>1856</td>
<td>209,279</td>
<td>1863</td>
<td>303,157</td>
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<tr>
<td>1857</td>
<td>290,640</td>
<td>1864</td>
<td>275,391</td>
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<td>1865</td>
<td>254,498</td>
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It is an established fact of history that the rich has always lived by exploiting the poor, and this exploitation has continued and is continuing at present. A big fish eats up the small fish, in the same was the capitalists have been robbing the workers on the basis of materialistic system. Exploitation rests on this very principle. The rulers and their officials loved money and they took to extortion to gain it, and this was the root cause of all tyranny and cruelty in Kashmir.13

Oppression and atrocities done by the rulers

The condition of the workmen and the artisans in towns and the Srinagar city alike was most miserable.

The condition of shawl weavers in the city was not good during the Sikh rule (1849-1846). The artisans could not maintain their families during those unhappy years. The wages of the weavers were very mean and low.\textsuperscript{14} The family of a shawl weaver lived in acute poverty. A weaver's son at the age of five years started his living and "thus another human being enters on a career of wretchedness and rears children, who in turn become heirs of his misery."\textsuperscript{15} The artisans, weavers, shawl baufs and other skilled sections of the Kashmiri society were subjected to the highest degree of social injustice and exploitation. Not to speak of the Dogras, Kashmiris were in fact exploited right from the time Kashmir was annexed by the Mughals. The Kashmiri folk saying "Agar Khanon Nous" speak of illegal exactions imposed on the common masses by the Mughal governors. At the same time "Mughal Father" also highlights the chaotic fabric of mughal administration.\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[15.] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
Actually, the trade and business of Kashmir received its first serious blow with the arrival of the Afghans in the valley. The harsh taxation policy adopted by the Afghans caused a great set-back to the economy of the country.\(^1\) Similarly, the shawl trade and industry, which was at one time the pride and honour of Kashmir, suffered enormously at the hands of the Afghans. As per the records, they collected forty lakh rupees annually by way of taxes from the shawl trade alone.\(^2\) The institution of Baag-shawl, a very unique of its kind, gave a terrible blow to the shawl industry.\(^3\) The Afghans were unsparing in looting and plundering the valley. They never cared for the poor Kashmiris. The following verse depicts the pathetic condition of the Afghan rule in the valley:

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\begin{align*}
\text{پیرسپمشک از زمان نبی فرستاد گفت کا اگزند طراب کرو}
\end{align*}
\]


\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid.
The condition of workmen and artisans in the towns and Srinagar alike was most miserable. The shawl weavers' condition also showed a worse picture during the Sikh times (1819-1846). The artisans could not maintain their families during these unhappy years. The wages of the weavers were very low. The family of a shawl weaver lived in acute poverty. The condition of labour class did not show any sign of improvement. It rather went from bad to worse. The distress and misery experienced by the people, coupled with natural calamities are reminiscent of very tough times. The Kashmiri folk saying "Sher Singhin Draag" has been a testimony to the fact that the rulers showed utter negligence in mitigating the distress of the people caused by the floods, drought and famine. In the time of Sher Singh (1831-1834) the trade received a severe blow. It was Mahan Singh, who did a lot to rehabilitate the trade and industries of


The wages of each weaver were 4 annas of which he paid two annas to Sikh governor of Kashmir.

21. Ibid.

22. Sher Singh was son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He exorted as much money as he could from the traders and Kardars without assigning any reason.
Kashmir. 23 The close contact of Kashmir with Punjab had brought economic life line to the common man, but the famines, floods, epidemics and apathetic attitudes of governors became an obstacle in the path of economic progress. 24

The change of political power from the Sikhs to Dogras did not bring any relief to the distressed Kashmiris, but it became usual practice with Kashmiris to leave the valley in search of labour during the period of natural calamities to earn their sustenance and simultaneously to escape from the heavy exactions. Many kinds of taxes were imposed on shawl weavers with the result that a good number of them left the valley. 25 An annual tax imposed on each shawl weaver was 47-81 rupees. The abject condition of shawl weavers further worsened owing to heavy official demand.

The most unfortunate thing for the shawl weavers was that they could not change the profession, because it was almost impossible to get a substitute. They had

23. Nursing Das Nargis, Tarikh-i-Dogra Desh, P. 630. Our folk literature also throws light on the condition of people during the natural calamities. For example Sahlab Dams, Buniyalnams, Mujwasa-nama, Beboojnama and other poetic compositions provide a clear picture of masses' abject condition and misery.

24. Ibid. Raj & Nazranana were some of the impositions, imposed upon the poor shawl-weavers.

to continue their adopted profession, which was generally hereditary in character, where the son succeeded the father in his profession. The dirty surroundings which sheltered the poor artisans badly affected their health conditions. Their were miserable and it was sad to contrast the beauty of the art work with the ugliness of the worker's life. 26 A massive class of artisans were badly paid, badly nourished and badly housed and therefore they were physically and morally wretched. 27 Though the shawl industry was a major source of income for the Government, little efforts were made to improve the working condition of the labour class. On the contrary, the artisans were subjected to indiscriminate treatment, which resulted in their starvation. The Franco-German War in 1870 closed for ever the doors of their fortune, and the famine of 1877-79 gave an irreparable blow to the dying industry from which it never revived again. There occurred a number of cases when people started dying of starvation. There was no option but to run away to

26. Ibid, P.64, Op.cit, Sheeraza, PP.30-31, W.R.Lawrence, The Valley of Kashmir, P.374, Nothing but death can release them from the bondage. Since the discharge of a shawl-bauf would reduce the Dogra Maharaja's revenue by 36 chillquets a year, deaths, suicide or flight were the only doors of release open to heavy laden shawl-baufs.

distant lands. The state government time and again was urged by the Punjab Government to take necessary steps to relieve the distressed artisans from pain. Hence large quantities of foodgrains were imported for the distribution of the city people. But nothing was done for the rural people. Distressed news began to be published in many newspapers in India about the famine conditions prevailing in the valley. It was reported that atrocities had been committed by the Dogra officials on the starving people. The State Government took steps to suppress adverse news. Har Gopal, a pleader, informed the British Government that in order to stop the Kashmiri migration nearly one hundred famine-stricken people were drowned in the Wular lake. Fredrick Henry Cooper came to Srinagar to enquire into these allegations. Even the Lord Bishop of Calcutta visited Kashmir to find out the truth about starvation deaths.  

The worst sufferers were the shawl workers. Arthur Brinckman has summed up the conditions of a Kashmiri worker as below:  

"To see the oppression is easy enough to prove each act and to trace it to its source is harder. But this I tried to do and I proved that oppression

exists for than any one dream of that I have yet met with them. The people may seen to work away quietly, many of them may be happy, never known a better lot; the ordinary traveller might not see the oppression through hearing of it. A gang of convicts seen uncommenting enough at work, which considering how they are fed and cared for, is not surprising. But, alas, Kashmiris are treated just like, so many convicts, work for their own benefit. They set to work quietly and with no pleasure, like the above mentioned convicts. It is all sowing for themselves to reap and carry to the barns of the hated government and race." The worst piece of oppression against the shawl weavers was that they could not leave their profession without finding substitute, which was almost very impossible to find out. 30

Oppression and atrocities done by the department of Daagh-Shawl.

There was a large department office, called the Daagh Shawl, in which two hundred Pandits were employed for the purchase of shawls. There was a head official, who was called the Darogha of Daagh-Shawl. Before a loom

shawl was legally made its fineness was checked by the Daagh-Shawl Department at a small piece of shawl. The proposed size was named and the price was thus calculated, piece then redeived with the government stamp and was laid up in the Daagh Shawl. The Karkhandar received a paper describing the shawl and giving the date of the stamp, for which he paid at the time 18.12 per cent on the price of the shawl. When the shawl was completed, it was taken to the Daagh-Shawl and the stamped piece was worked into it. No loom shawl could be sold without first obtaining this seal of the Daagh-Shawl department. 31 Some of the Pandits were employed to check the working of the Karkhand, situated at villages and town of the valley. 32

These Pandits of Daagh-Shawl department demanded and received illegal remuneration from the Karkhandars are boat-hire, road expenses, etc. Their visits to these Karkhamas were very frequent, so these remunerations amounted to a considerable sum. At the end of the year, the amount paid into the Daagh-Shawl by each Karkhandar was calculated by the officials and compared with the amount he would have paid, and had the tax of Rs. 47.3 per shawl bauf been taken from him instead.

31. Cf. Ibid. PP. 43-44.
32. Ibid.
The deficiency was then paid by the Karkhandar. It rarely or never happened that he paid percentage in excess, because he entertained a doubt that in the event of having done. So, the difference would not have been refunded to him by the Darogha. He restricted himself, therefore, to the making of such number of shawls that the tax upon which would not exceed the amount of the original import of Rs. 47.8 per shawl bauf annually. But such an arrangement was beneficial to the interests of officials only and it was detrimental to the shawl baufs.\(^{33}\)

It was in the year 1847 that the shawl-weavers organised themselves and revolted against the tyranny and exploitation. They struck work and about 4000 fled the valley. Maharaja Gulab Singh assured them that the complaints would be heard. It was in July 1847\(^{34}\) that the Maharaja enquired into their case and fixed their

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33. Ibid, CF, P.44
The Kashmiri proverb Namān Myetch Te Kaman Kith bears testimony to fact, that the benefit of the work done by the Kashmiris was harvested by the officials of the Dogra Movement. Same happened to the shawl-weavers, who worked very hard for their subsistence, but the benefit went to the officials, who looted and plundered the shawl-weavers and made them mere serfs or slaves.

34. K.M.Panikar, The Founding of the Kashmir State, 1930, P.139.
wages and abolished the tax which was imposed on the finished articles. He also promulgated a new law which did not make it necessary for apprentices (Shagirds) to work for the same master. Thus the Shagirds became free and no longer remained serfs under their masters. Although the Maharaja passed and promulgated some laws, the condition of the workman remained the same as before.

During Ranbir Singh's times, the social condition was not appealing, Wilson remarked that the wages of the shawl weavers were miserable, weavers were like slaves. They could neither leave the valley, nor change their employment. Sir Richard Temple, another visitor, wrote that the weavers formed "a numerous and withal a miserable class, badly paid, badly nourished and badly housed and therefore physically and morally wretched." Dr. Klmslie, who had closely studied the social conditions of the weavers, had remarked that, "they were the most miserable portion of the population both physically and morally, crowded together in small and badly ventilated workshops, earning a mere pittance and insufficiently

35. Ibid.
nourished, they suffered from chest infection, rheumatism and scrofula. 38

Sale of Rice

For many centuries, there had existed a unique practice of procuring foodgrains, particularly rice, from villages and storing them for city people in the capital city of Srinagar. But during the Dogra period, the Maharaja paroled Kashmir out into a hundred odd tracts and distributed it among his stooges. It was strange that Kashmiri tillers, for the first time, were deprived of their homes and hearths. Rice was procured by the Maharaja's government and distributed to the Shawl-bouf and Sada-bauf workers, through the agency of Daagh Shawl. This clearly shows that the shawl baufs were like the bonded slaves of the Maharaja. 39 They had to weave in order to eat. Their families rested in the hands of the officers of the Maharaja. They were treated like hostages to whom the rice was sold by the Maharaja's Officers at whatever rates they liked.

There was an endless corruption and confusion in such an arrangement of distribution of rice. The artisans

position was like that of a hostage or a slave in lieu of food. This system of distribution of rice reduced him to the state of semi-starvation and, sometimes, to hunger.  

**Starving conditions**

When people started dying of starvation, they had no option but to run away from the valley to the far-off plains of Punjab. The Governor of Punjab urged the Maharaja to take necessary action. Rice was imported for distribution among the city people. But nothing was done for the villagers. Distressing news was published in many newspapers in India about the famine conditions prevailing in the valley. The created mass discontentment in the valley as the state authorities could not import sufficient quantities of rice. The

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40. The whole system was explained by Robert Thropp as under, 'On the arrival of grain in Srinagar, a large amount is set-aside for the shawl-baufs and portions of it are, from time to time made over to Darogha for them when that official receives an order for so much sale from the Governor be taken his accounts. Then he writes orders for each of Karkhandar entitling them to receive so much rice, according to the number of men in their employ. From certain, specified boats, The Karkhandar, on receipt of the order, sends for the boat or boats named and distributes rice to his shawl-baufs, keeping an account of the account delivered to each to be deducted from his monthly wages, the Karkhandar being himself charged with the total cost of the rice in his account with the Darogha. Robert Thropp, PP. 49-50.

41. It was claimed that the Dogras took steps to suppress the news.
shawl-weavers were the worst hit. The people had no other alternative but to migrate to the plains of Punjab or to die of starvation which defamed the state Government and led to intervention of the British authorities. The State Government had to seal the borders of Punjab. 42

Kashmiris practically starved during the early period of the Dogra rule. Famine conditions had become acute by 1865 and the masses did not reconcile to the Dogra rulers. Their economic ruin aggravated the situation and the people had to run away towards Punjab. The shawl weavers had given a lead in this respect, when in 1847, they had started their migration marches towards Lahore. A major portion of farmers and workers migrated to the plains of Punjab between 1865 and 1870.

Many Kashmiris made their way over remote and difficult mountain passes, others by attaching themselves to a foreign visitors' camp. One way or the other they tried to reach Punjab in order to escape from the officials of the Maharaja or Daagh Shawl. They left their wives and children behind because it was impossible for them to take them with them. They did not know whether they would see them again or not, because the path they had to cross was dangerous and risky. But they preferred

it to their imprisonment by the Maharaja. 43

The First Protest

In 1865, Diwan Kripa Ram was appointed the Governor of Kashmir. In the spring of the same year about 1200 to 1500 shawl baufs decided to meet the new governor at Banihal, 44 to complain to him about their grievances. 45 The new Governor told them that he would listen to them in Srinagar. After reaching Srinagar, he did not keep his word. The new Governor was supposed to recover and pay to the state twelve lakhs of Rupees. The taxation policy of the state was managed in such a way by the employers that its greater burden fell on its

45. The shawl-baufs had two complaints. First was that inconsonance of the Government order, no shawl bauf was allowed to purchase more than eight Kharware of Shali yearly, and that such an amount was insufficient for their support.

The second complaint was that the deduction in the price of shali sold to them by the Government, which had been ordered by the Dogra Maharaja about three years before, should be allowed to them in full; Arthur Brinckman, Op.Cit., P.35, S.N.Gadur, Kashmir Papers, P.65.
weavers. Such weaver had to pay 49 rupees as a contribution towards the sum of 12 lakhs of rupees to be paid to the state. An ordinary weaver had, thus, to pay five rupees in tax out of his monthly income, which ranged from seven to eight rupees. This intolerable policy forced them to unite and present a petition of their grievances to the Governor. On April 29th, 1865, they marched towards Zaldagar, the processionists uttered slogans expressing their demands. They carried "a bier, placed a cloth over it shouting "Rajkak is dead, who will give him a grave?" They also burnt effigy of Rajkak Dhar.46 They were ordered to disperse but they refused. Troops were then sent under the command of Colonel Bijoy Singh to crush the procession. They came down upon the unarmed and unguarded labourers who were surrounded and then charged with guns and spears. After some deaths, the procession ran towards the bridge of Haji Rather and most of them (after they were pursued by soldiers) fell into the marshy canal and got drowned. Hundreds of weavers received major and minor injuries and many of them died and they were later on returned to the people by the army.47 The leaders of the agitation were arrested and beaten mercilessly, strapped and thrown into a dungeon. Two of the leaders, namely, Abli Baba


and Sheikh Rasool, died from these atrocities, and two brothers, Qidda Lala and Sona Shah, were sent to be imprisoned in the Bahu-Fort. Hundreds of agitators were imprisoned in the prison of Habak, where most of them died from cold and starvation. Heavy fine was imposed on all the four leaders. And when it was known that all the four leaders were poor, it was reduced to Rs. 25,000 in each case. But the Maharaja did not agree to this remission because he wanted to ensure that in future nobody could have the courage to protest. The affair was reported to Jammu, but no enquiries appear to have been made at that time. About a month and a half afterwards, Raj Kak did really died with unenviable feelings, one can fancy and the shawl baufs were left to purchase their rice.


The four leaders of shawl-bauf protest like Sheikh Rasool, Abli Baba, Qidda Lalla and Sona Shah were arrested and brought to Shergarhi Palace and beaten mercilessly. They were thrown in a dungeon. Both Sheikh Rasool and Abli Baba died of artoticities. Some were put into cages and kept at the entrances of the palaces at Jammu and Srinagar, and the passers-by were asked to spit on them and stone them. Thus died human beings in cages like birds without food and water.
Whenever there was any uprising for freedom, Ranbir Singh put down that with a strong hand and the British shut their eyes on it.  

Silk Factory Protest, 1924

The labour rising of 1924 of the Government-owned Silk Factory was another important landmark in the history of workers' movement after the shawlbauf protest in 1865. The main cause of the uprising of the silk factory workers was their miserable economic condition. These workers had been complaining of the "insufficiency of wages, the corruption of the officials and the tyranny of the inspecting staff".  

There was, practically speaking, no factory labour in Srinagar, except in the silk factory. With the progress of this industry, however, industrial labour and its problems began to grow in prominence. In the twenties of the present century, the labour problem in

50. Nature didn't take pity on the poor shawl weavers. It was in 1878-79 that famine visited the valley which took a good number of weavers in these years. It is said that they died like flies. Those who survived could not take up other occupation because they had refined and delicate hands, as a result of which they died in destitution. Lawrence, Op.Cit., P.215; G.L.Koul Kashmir Past and Present, P.45.

Srinagar assumed new proportions, when the conditions in the silk factory worsened. Gradually, the workers become conscious of their rights and raised their voice against exploitation. They had no medical facilities. There was no adequate arrangement for the education of their children. They got low wages considering the amount they put in. So they demanded reasonable wages, and formed Labour Associations. The Srinagar Silk Factory became a centre of attraction, where demonstrations took place in the third decade of the present century. The strike heralded a new age, the age of trade unionism and socialism, which reflected social tension inherent in the emerging industrial system.

Since their protest against the misbehaviour of the officials and their corruption was not heard for a long time, the workers resorted to the method of strike in July 1924. Their strike continued for several days. They adopted several strategies to pressurise the

52. M.I.Khan, History of Srinagar, PP.82-83.
Hafiz Mohammad Ismail, Op.Jitz, June 13,1924, Item 1. The contention of these labourers was that in addition to their low wages, they were insulted by the officials who demanded bribes and made them work at their houses like domestic servants. They also complained that they were marked absent from duty for half a day if they reached the factory a little late. They demanded a just treatment and an increase of wages.

53. M.I.Khan, Ibid., P.83.
Government to accede to their demands. They convened the workers' meetings and took out processions demanding good treatment, justice and increase in their wages. They were supported by Anjuman-i-Nusrat-ul-Islam and Anjuman-i-Hamdard in their cause. On July 9th, when they saw the Government had stationed troops within the premises of the Silk Factory, the workers got provoked. They assembled together and challenged the action of the authorities. This was followed by an open confrontation between them and the armed forces. As a result of the opening of fire on the workers, "seven workers died and forty were injured".  

The military action generated sympathy in the masses for the labourers with the result that they came out of their houses, and joined the workers. When the authorities on duty failed to disperse the protectors, the military opened fire, killing several and injured many. Some women were humiliated and insulted. The city of Srinagar was handed over to the army who patrolled the areas of disturbance and ordered the people to remain within their houses in peace. The labourers and

their leaders were arrested and imprisoned. The only reaction showed by the masses against the Government decision was that "partial hartal" was observed by the Muslim shopkeepers in the city to protest against the judgement. This brought to an end the Silk Factory of 1924. But the action of the Muslims in their dealing with the labour problem made them believe that so long as the Government was not willing to concede their rights, they had to suffer.

A memorandum presented to Lord Reading during his official tour to Kashmir in 1924 was, therefore, the first attempt made by Muslim subjects in ventilating their grievances and voicing their demand for the grant of their basic rights. The Viceroy arrived in Srinagar on October 14, 1924. While he was taken in a river procession from Shaltang, thousands of men, women, children, school and college students were lined up on the banks of the river Jhelum to greet the guest. It was during the course of this procession that as a mark of protest against the discriminatory treatment accorded to the Muslim subjects in the State, a blank flag demonstration was planned. When the motor launcher of the Viceroy reached the Khanqah Shrine at the bank of the river Jhelum, some of

the Muslims wearing black turbans on their heads exhibited themselves and they along with other Muslims shouted slogans to the Viceroy to "help us and give us justice". At the other spot of the bank of the Jhelum a banner was unfurled which carried in bold letters the words, "Tyranny, Desecration of the Sacred Places, British protection". However, where the Viceroyal party was put up and lodged, the Muslims presented a memorandum to the Viceroy of their demands. Nothing was known as to what happened to the memorandum; no effective action was taken by the government to mitigate the grievances of the Muslim community. The Maharaja appointed a three-member Commission of Enquiry into the incident. But the commission, comprising only non-Kashmiris, "exonerated the Dogra Government and dismissed the charges as unproved and untrue". Therefore, the Government exiled and dismissed the signatories to the memorandum and also deprived them of their Jagirs. The presentation of the memorandum was an unarranged attempt to express protest to the British authorities, after the Muslims had lost all hopes of receiving justice from their local rulers. It was the result of the efforts of a group of Muslim elite consisting of the business elite, the religious

56. Hafiz Mohammad Ismail, Personal Diary (Unpublished), dated October 14, 1924; Item 1 quoted by G.H. Khan.

elite, and the educational elite, in the state service. It was simply a protest to acquaint the British authorities with the real conditions of the Muslims masses and a means of seeking redressal of these grievances.

Taking the Silk factory workers revolt and the presentation of the memorandum together, the issues involved in both these protests were of economic character, such as increase of wages, better conditions of work as well as rights of the Muslims which had always been denied to them. The Silk Factory workers had launched a collective action on these issues in the form of strikes. The nature of their protests was non-violent. They also voiced their protests in the shape of processions, raising of slogans, showing placards and banners. The presentation of the memorandum to the Viceroy was also a non-violent protest organised and arranged by the mere conscious cadres of the Muslim educated elite, both religious and non-religious elements. The exhibition of black flags, black turbans and voices raised for justice and help were the forms used to express the protest. But in both these cases, there was no organization. The organizers in both the cases were to some extent successful in mobilising the masses in support of the grievances the Muslim subjects had been suffering for centuries. These developments were encouraging, as it showed that the
Kashmiris were responding to the wave of modernization and awareness and political consciousness. These strikes and protests generated new ideas and sentiments. People became conscious of their rights and started to organise themselves against the Dogra rule. A political wave began to emerge in the valley.

A similar political wave against autocracy and feudalistic state was coming from the other parts of the country. Jammu was the first to see the effect of this wave on 29th April 1931. Another incident took place at Srinagar in 1931, when Abdul Qadir, in a meeting at Khanqahi Muallah was invited to speak. He delivered a speech which was considered seditious by the Government. He was arrested and charged at court, and the hearing was fixed on 13th July, 1931.

58. Ibid. PP. 362-365.
59. It was in 1931 that the Lahore Muslim Press started to send newspapers through which the Maharaja and his autocratic rule was condemned. There was no existence of press in the valley. It is with this background, that the newspaper started to pour into the state from outside.
60. It was on this very date as ugly incident took place at Jammu, when the state police interferred with the recilation of Khutba by the Muslims after their usual prayer.
A huge mass of Muslims had assembled outside the Jail and a contingent of sepoys had already been posted to guard it that day. The admittance demanded by the Muslims was resisted. The mob became furious and stoned the sepoys. The sepoys opened fire and twenty-one people were killed and many were injured.

It was for the first time in the annals of Kashmir history, that the voice of the people could be heard in public protest. This development in the state was an expression of deep resentment against the unlawful measures and the limit of powers exercised on the people of Kashmir suffering under the rule of autocracy.

Soon after the mass uprising of July 1931, the Maharaja appointed a commission under the presidency of B.S. Galancy to enquire into the matters and grievances of the Muslim community. As a result of this enquiry, religious places were restored back to the Muslims and other communities and adequate representation to different communities in services was guaranteed and proprietary rights to Zamindars on their land were granted. The freedom of press also came into existence in the valley. The movement of 1931 created an undisputed leader of

63. Ibid.
down-trodden Kashmiris in the person of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, who fought against economic exploitation and political oppression. Kashmiris composed many folk verses in his praise and courage.  

He founded the Muslim Conference in 1932 which spearheaded the movement till 1939.

He made nationalism, secularism and socialism the guiding principles of his career. It was in this background that he separated from his colleagues and established his own "All Jammu and Kashmir National Conference" in 1939. He included in this party like-minded persons, men of strong socialist convictions,

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65. As quoted by Farooq Ahmad Bhat. The above song speaks the love and regards Kashmiris had for their leader, who voiced against the age-old oppression, injustice and economic exploitation.


67. There were G.M. Sadiq, Madan Lal, Ali Mohammad, Ved Prakash, Ragunath, Vashnavi, D.P. Dhar,
who by their sincere efforts geared the freedom movement of Kashmir towards right direction.

There was profound impact of socialistic state of Russia on the leadership of the National Conference. The peoples' leader persisted with his sagacious efforts and steered the shaky ship of Kashmiris' freedom struggle clear of marshes. By and by the educated middle classes of other communities also appreciated his progressive outlook and rallied around him. It was not only the National Conference which aimed to establish a socialistic society in the state, but the "All Jammu and Kashmir Kisan Conference too wanted to achieve the same goal.

This party believed strongly in socialism. The first president of the conference was Abdul Salam Yettoo, whose party brought to surface new socialist fervour and met at Dialgam for the first time. In his presidential address, he explained the aims and objectives in the following words: "The movement of the toiling masses in the world has awakened us also, we have begun to look at the freedom movement struggle of our country from a

Peer Giasuddin, Gulam Rasool Reenzoo, Motilal Misri, Janki Nath Zutshi, J.L. Kilam, Mohammad Anwar Akhoon, Baha-ud-Din Zahid, Sardar Darban Singh, Ram Payara Saraf, Kishen Dev Sethi, Mohammad Lone and Miss Mahmuda Ali Shah, who was the first socialist lady and stood for the cause of socialism.
different angle. New political freedom alone is not our cherished goal. We demand and crave for social, economic and spiritual emancipation as well. The toiling masses of the sub-continent of India not only want to throw away the yoke of foreign imperialism, but are also keen to face themselves from the bondage of indigenous feudalism and capitalism. The deliverance from alien rule is not far off. Events bear testimony to the fact that the British cannot stay long in India. There is an awakening in the country that the British hold it in subjugation. But let me pose a question: who will replace the British authority in India? Will there be a Government of upper classes or one representing the toiling masses?

He concluded his speech in the following words:

"Our movement is world-wide, Hundreds and millions of toiling masses throughout the world are associated with it. It is bound to succeed sooner or later. If we organise ourselves and march unitedly towards our goal, we can establish the society of our conception sooner than is expected."  


69. Ibid.
Thus the freedom movement was given more impetus on the principles of socialist ideology by the Kisan Conference and the hope of the advent of a new era in the political, economic and social life of Kashmir arose in the hearts of the tyrannised and persecuted millions in the valley.

With the passage of time, the National Conference became a more powerful organization than any other party in the state. The party for the first time adopted the "Naya Kashmir Plan" in 1944 on the principle of socialism as its objective. It was welcomed by the people of Kashmir, since it reflected their basic urges and sentiments. At the same time, it prepared the people to fight against the feudal forces and evils of social disorder.

Sheikh Abdullah's foresight and his faith in secularism was the background of his political goal. He

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70. Ibid., The Naya Kashmir document consists of fifty articles and is divided into two parts viz., the constitution of the state and the National economic Plans. The National economic Plan proclaimed that the objective of National Conference was to create a classless society in which every individual would have the right to develop and to enjoy better standards of life by eradicating means of exploitation and providing equal opportunities for all.
launched the "Quit Kashmir Movement" in May 1946 and was wholeheartedly supported by the congress leaders of India, so that the age-long tyranny and suppression would end and establishment of democratic government be possible. 71

71. G.L.Koul, Kashmir through the Ages, P.164.